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ABSTRACT

The current data on the incidence and predilections of adult students fall into "good news" and "bad news" categories for educators in the humanities. The good news begins with the sheer numbers of potential adult students. In 1975, about 17 million adults were engaged in continuing education, and this figure has probably increased dramatically since then. Adult students also tend to be more highly motivated than college students of traditional ages. Although adult students' pragmatism is part of the bad news, this characteristic can be turned to good account. Young adults are more concerned with "practical" courses to help them with career preparation, job advancement, their interests in hobbies and recreations, and home/family living: they are not sensitive to what the humanities may hold for them. Adults at age forty-five and beyond show interest in the humanities for personal satisfaction and cultural enrichment increases. For these older students, who seek a synthesis of what they know, what they are learning, and how they will live, the interdisciplinary approach to education satisfies both the short-range goals upon which they insist and the long-range goals toward which educators strive. So humanities instructors should stop thinking about interdisciplinary studies as a dilution of essence and begin to think of such an approach as the essence of education itself. (RL)

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The Humanities and the Adult Student

(Delivered at MLA, San Francisco, December 1979)

There has been a great amount of hoopla lately about the adult student, who has come to be seen as the demographic nostrum to cure us all of bankruptcy and despair. To date, the advent of this "new" student has been responded to primarily by a series of marketing strategies: a proliferation of continuing education courses, weekend colleges and branch campuses popped down in libraries, banks and even shopping centers. With a certain amount of cynicism, colleges have made available courses in personal psychology, creative stitchery and amateur weather forecasting which tend to discredit the meaning of adult education. However, only a few educators have begun to look seriously at adult students to see whether and in what ways they may differ from eighteen to twenty-two year olds, to try to determing whether adults are simply post adolescents with bifocals and mortgages or whether they represent a new challenge in higher education with radically different cognitive abilities, needs, learning styles and academic goals.

That is not to say that there has been no research in the field. Building on the work in adult development by Erikson,

Neugarten, Levinson and others, Arthur Chickering at the Center for the Study of Higher Education in Memphis, Allen Tough at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and a number of people at the Harvard Graduate School of Education as well as others throughout this country and Great Britain are making significant contributions toward understanding the adult as student and towards defining how those differences that take place as adults move through the stages of human growth and development will have impact on those of us who are designing curricula and individual courses. Still, there are a number of important areas in which research has barely scratched the surface. For example, those of us in English and modern languages may suspect changing reading and writing habits or acquiring a new language may be more difficult for older students whose linguistic patterns are so firmly entrenched, but the evidence so far is scanty. And certainly, few of us outside of departments of education have yet had the time or inclination to pursue those things that <u>are</u> known and to incorporate them into new teaching strategies.

The current data on the incidence and predilections of adult students falls into the "there's good news and bad news" category.

The good news begins with the sheer numbers of potential students. In 1975 an NIE study found about 17 million adults

engaged in continuing education of varying kinds, and we know that figure has increased radically in the past five years. Even more encouraging, Allen Tough's data tells us that during a twelve month period, ninety percent of all adults conduct at least one major learning effort (major being defined as adding up to at least seven hours), and that the average learner conducts five distinct projects, spending an average of one hundred hours per learning effort - a total of five hundred hours a year. The bad news, for those of us with an economic stake in education, is that only twenty percent of these projects are initiated or sponsored by institutions or professionals.

More good news: adult students tend to be more highly motivated than the eighteen to twenty-two year old. Returning to college represents for mature students a significant step. It is not the knee jerk reaction of the high school senior who along about November first starts sending our college applications. On the contrary, adults have usually gone through much soul searching before they make the decision to attend college and have a fairly clear idea of why they are going and what use they expect to make of the courses or the degree itself. Furthermore, and I think this is still good news, adults tend to be consumer oriented. It is their own money they're spending, and they will not accept shoddy teaching or ill conceived course

content. They complain vociferously if they feel they are not well served.

Their pragmatism is part of the bad news about adult students, though it can be turned to good account. Younger adults are primarily interested in preparation for new careers, and those slightly older (25-44) may be preparing for career shifts or advancement. Neither group is immediately sensitive to what study in the humanities may hold for them. Beyond professionally oriented study, they are interested in courses having to do with hobbies and recreation (the arts, sports, travel), home and family living (gardening, child development), and personal development (physical fitness, personal psychology, investment strategies). If they are degree candidates, distribution requirements will send them into humanities courses, but the non-matriculants tend not to be interested, or at least not until about age forty-five and beyond at which time interest in credit or certification declines and interest in the humanities for personal satisfaction and cultural enrichment increases, particularly as they contemplate the leisure time of the retirement years.

Some more good news: the most constant descriptor of adult learners is that they have already had some higher education. Apparently the more education people have, the more they want, which means that the pool of potential students is increasing as

the educational attainment of the populace rises. Moreover, this means that outside of basic education programs, the rate of literacy among adult students is fairly high. They are less likely to be the victims of the television era or of permissive schooling, and it has been the experience of many English faculty that their level of reading and writing ability exceeds that of the average college freshman.

Some other things it is wise to keep in mind about adult students: they are limited geographically by their jobs or family responsibilities, so that primarily residential colleges will probably not be able to serve them. Furthermore, the financial aid picture is dim. Most programs are not set up for part time students (which adults tend to be), and the monetary guidelines make an uneasy fit with adult economic needs. Moreover, there is a considerable dropout rate because of financial pressures. Parents, for instance, often express feelings of guilt for "indulging" themselves by taking courses, and will frequently leave college if junior needs a new car or piano lessons.They will also drop out for other reasons: pressure from jobs or families, inability to meet regular class hours, feelings of inadequacy or discouragement. Older students are frequently convinced that they have forgotten how to learn, and any difficulty they encounter may be seen as confirmation of their

lack of ability. However, with encouragement many adults do well in independent study, and institutional flexibility in regard to hours and locale may enable them to complete work outside the traditional classroom setting.

Over the past five years, my experience working with adult students, whose average age was thirty-seven, suggests that if we are flexible and imaginative, it is still possible to put the humanities back into the center of the curriculum. We can begin by restoring that much maligned word "relevance" to our vocabularies without accompanying it with apologetic shrugs. Of course education must be relevant; it must have implications for the four fifths of a person's life that is spent outside of formal schooling. Of course there are connections between history and tomorrow's headlines, between literature and life and death. We have, in our self-consciousness about "relevance" coupled it with "easy." We don't wish to teach toward "easy relevance" as though this were an intellectual crime on a scale with infanticide. But if we believe that the life of the mind and the life of external experience are intimately and indissolubly connected and that nothing that touches the one leaves the other unchanged, then we must proudly proclaim the relevance of literature and languages and philosophy and history.

For example, I have seen the most turned-off business majors

become totally involved in an American literature course that focused on the ethics and morality of business and business men as perceived by such novelists as W. Dean Howells, Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Fitzgerald, Marquand and on up to Joseph Heller. I have seen a group of human and community services students arguing passionately about the meaning of Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality," despairing over the social philosophy that kept Oliver Twist institutionalized, weeping over Lear and Ivan Ilyich. These students understood the works on an experiential level that most traditional college-age students simply cannot reach and from which many of us are barred by over familiarity and intellectualization.

What we might do immediately for the adult student is what many of us have been proposing we do for all students; that is, to rethink how it is we teach the humanities. In literature, for instance, there has been an implicit hierarchy in our concerns: a progressive order of attention representing an increasingly sophisticated set of analytical abilities. Crudely stated these would be: 1) the thematic content of the work, what it is about, the universal concerns it embodies; 2) the context out of which the work arose, the nature and intent of the artist, the intellectual climate of the times, the historical, socio-cultural

milieu; and 3) the complex of aesthetic concerns that not only illuminate the content but have to do with the nature of the specific genre and with art itself. As our professional interests have increasingly over the past thirty or forty years centered on the third of these, the aesthetic, we have run the risk of alienating students from the poem or the story. As we pursue our challenging but fairly abstruse concerns among the proliferating "isms" of literary criticism, much has been lost that connects students and literature in a vital, humanizing way. The continuum from theme to context to aesthetic concerns should probably be modified for most undergraduate students, but particularly when the new adult population is considered we may find that the initial point of entry, the theme or universal concern embodied in the work, is also the culminating point. Indeed, Jerome Bruner's figure of the spiral may be the image of choice; students, having gone from theme through context to aesthetic concerns, can be led back to theme at a higher level, reexperiencing the meaning of the work with an enriched awareness of how structure and texture have shaped their responses.

Similarly, we must stop thinking of interdisciplinary studies as a dilution of essence and begin thinking about them as the essence itself. Adults, bringing with them their own perspectives

based on a broad experience of life, are not only more open to interdisciplinary studies, they tend naturally toward integration of knowledge and are impatient with what they see as artificial academic separations. They will insist upon connecting the study of Huckleberry Finn with what they know about slavery, child psychology, the geography of the Mississippi River and the economic impact of the steamboat in nineteenth century America. They question the family and social environment of Jane Austen's small country towns; they quote existentialist philosophers when reading French poets. The passion for integration informs their studies, and it is the joy of putting the disparate pieces together that they--and we--call education. For older students seeking synthesis of what they know, what they are learning and how they will live, the interdisciplinary mode satisfies both the short range goals upon which they insist and the longer range goals toward which we as educators strive.

Reaching the adult student is not easy. They expect a great deal from their professors, and they are quick to challenge that which contradicts their experience of reality and sometimes stubborn about relinquishing their assumptions and preconceptions about that reality. As stubborn as we are. We must occasionally relax our

controls, allow the students' interests and needs to emerge and lead us in new directions, allow us to see in new ways. We--and they--must begin to view education as a process of collaboration from which both professor and student emerge enriched.

It is well to remember that what students can learn in four years of education, or six, or eight, is finite and cannot even begin to embrace all the possible ways of knowing, the various kinds of meaning. But if we truly believe that through study in the humanities people may be helped to develop critical reasoning skills, imagination, aesthetic awareness, enhanced appreciation of humanistic values, if we perceive and <u>project</u> the humanities as challenging, liberating and absolutely relevant to the lives we lead, then we may indeed restore their study to the heart of education.